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ABSTRACT

The typology of VSO (verb-subject-object) languages cannot be explained in terms of the syntactic theory (Government and Binding theory) that governs the more common SVO languages. It is considered that VSO languages might be derived from underlying SVO structure. This idea, known as the SVO Hypothesis, is presented as a paradigm to which examples of two VSO languages are applied: Welsh and Breton. The evidence that makes the SVO Hypothesis inapplicable to Welsh is the language's obligatory fronting of the auxiliary verb over the main verb and the automatic groupings of proper constituents of verb-fronted structures (VPs) that lack a verb. The SVO Hypothesis cannot be applied to Breton since its main verbs move left of the subjects even when an inflected auxiliary verb is present; its main verbs are positioned separately from the direct objects; and its copula verbs play the role of the auxiliary verbs by moving to the left of the main verb which is always left of the subject. The syntactic theory proposed in the SVO Hypothesis presents richly detailed observations about the behavior of syntactic constituents but continues to have difficulty in applying these behaviors to VSO languages. (TR)

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AGAINST THE SVO HYPOTHESIS FOR VSO LANGUAGES

by Richard Wojcik

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the LSA/AAAL/ADS
(New York, NY, December 27-30, 1986)

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Against the SVO Hypothesis for VSO Languages[1]

1. The SVO Hypothesis for VSO Languages

Typological VSO languages are a problem for any syntactic theory that takes verb phrases to be central to the definition of subjects and direct objects. Joseph Emonds was one of the first to suggest a solution that has come to be known as the SVO Hypothesis (Emonds 1976:7n5):

> There are relatively few VSO languages. If VSO is a base order, the notion of "deep structure subject NP" would not be realized in just these languages. These facts suggest that VSO languages might be derived from SVO base orders by a local transformation...

If VSO languages are derived from underlying SVO structure, then they are inherently more complex than SVO or SOV languages. This makes them more difficult to learn and, therefore, less common.

Emonds' hypothesis is particularly appealing to supporters of x-bar theory, which is one of the foundations of modern Government and Binding (GB) theory. They often describe the VP node as V', or the lexical projection of the main verb. This constituent strictly defines the subcategorization domain for verbs, which seem to have the same subcategorization properties in VSO languages as in other languages. Moreover, main verbs serve to assign Case to direct

objects, which is difficult to explain in GB theory if verbs and direct objects are separated by subjects. Subjects are supposed to receive Case from an adjacent TENSE, or INFL, morpheme, whereas direct objects are supposed to receive it from an adjacent main verb. The SVO hypothesis rationalizes all of this by putting subjects, verbs, and direct objects in their expected configuration in underlying representation. In fact, it is almost inconceivable in a GB framework that VSO languages could exist without something like Emonds' SVO hypothesis.

Richard Sproat's "Welsh Syntax and VSO Structure" (1985) is one of the few articles in the literature that attempts to justify the SVO hypothesis with data from an actual VSO language. His arguments rely heavily on the interesting observation that VP constituents are actually quite common in the surface syntax of VSO languages, particularly in tenseless subordinate clauses. This suggests that the TENSE morpheme might have something to do with removing a main verb from its underlying VP constituent. He therefore makes the following claims for Welsh syntax:

(i) Underlying order, as in English, is S-INFL-V-O.

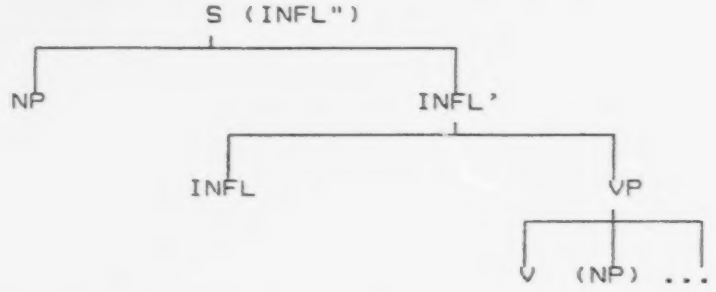
(ii) VSO languages can only assign Case to the right.

(iii) INFL-S-V-O order is created for the purposes of Case assignment.

(iv) Since INFL requires a morpheme to 'carry' it, surface INFL+V-S-O order is sometimes created by a rule called VERB FRONTING.

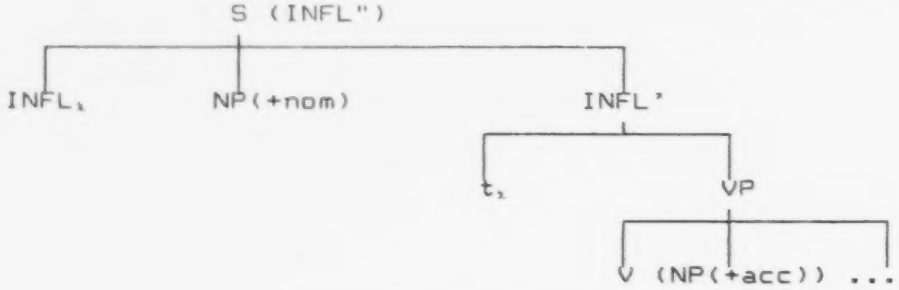
To make matters clear, we note that (i) posits the following underlying configuration (cf. Sproat p. 174):

(1)



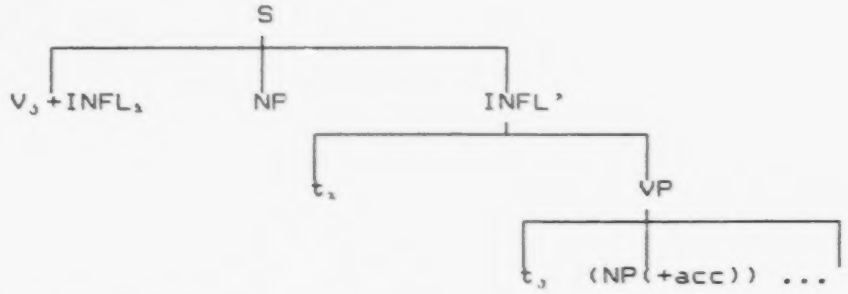
Item (ii) motivates (iii), which gives us the following structure:

(2)



Now the main verb is fronted, since there is no morphological carrier for INFL:

(3)



Note that, if an auxiliary verb were present, it would get fronted instead of the main verb. According to (iv), the motivation for main verb fronting is to get it to serve as a tense bearer. Thus, Welsh can have either VSO surface order with a tensed main verb or AuxSVO surface order with a tensed auxiliary.

Sproat claims that (4) and (5) are synonymous sentences, but (4) lacks the optional auxiliary verb do:[2]

(4) [$_{V}$ Gwelodd] [$_{NP}$ Siôn] [$_{NP}$ ddraig].
saw-3sg John (a) dragon
"John saw a dragon."

(5) [$_{V}$ Gwnaeth] [$_{NP}$ Siôn] [$_{VP}$ weld draig].
did-3sg John see (a) dragon

If we take Sproat's SVO Hypothesis seriously, however, then he is really claiming that (4) has the following surface structure constituency, where the fronted verb leaves a trace behind:

(6) [$_{INFL+V}$ Gwelodd] [$_{NP}$ Siôn] [$_{VP}$ t [$_{NP}$ ddraig]]].

In the case of (5), the Celtic periphrastic structure results from the optional application of DO SUPPORT.

2. The Problem of Verbless VPs

Sproat's analysis generates proper surface word order in Welsh,but does it capture the proper constituent groupings? The VERB-FRONTED structures in (3) and (6) contain surface VPs that lack a verb. Nowhere in his article does Sproat offer independent justification of such a constituent, and there may even be evidence that there is no such constituent. The following sentences, cited

in Sproat, are from Awberry's (1976) monograph on Welsh syntax:[3]

(7) a. Rhoddodd y dyn y ffon i'r ci.
gave the man the stick to-the dog
"The man gave the stick to the dog."

b. Y ffon a roddodd y dyn i'r ci.
the stick ptcl gave the man to-the dog

c. I'r ci y rhoddodd y dyn y ffon.
to-the dog prt gave the man the stick

d. *Y ffon i'r ci a roddodd y dyn.
the stick to-the dog prt gave the man

Sentence (7a) has the unmarked word order in which VERB FRONTING has allegedly taken place. (7b) and (7c) are instances of direct object Topicalization and indirect object Topicalization, respectively. However, (7d) should be grammatical under Sproat's analysis, but it isn't. That is, y ffon i'r ci is a verbless VP in his Welsh surface structures. Note that Welsh VPs seem to undergo Topicalization freely:[4]

(8) a. Y mae'r dyn [$_{VP}$wedi gweld y ci].
is-the man past see the dog
"The man saw the dog."

b. [$_{VP}$Wedi gweld y ci] y mae'r dyn.

Awberry does point out that more than one NP can be fronted if

they form a single constituent:

(9) a. Darllenodd y dyn [$_{np}$lyfr am bysgod].
read-past the man (a) book about fish
"The man read a book about fish."

b. [$_{np}$Llyfr am bysgod] a ddarllenodd y dyn.
(a) book about fish prt read the man

c. *Llyfr a ddarllenodd y dyn am bysgod.
(a) book prt read the man about fish

(9b) and (9c) show that PP modifers form a constituent with their heads. Although there may be some natural explanation for the ungrammaticality of (7d), Sproat does not give it, nor does he give any indication of being aware of the problem of verbless VPs in his analysis.

3. The Problem of Breton Auxiliaries

The Breton language, which is closely related to Welsh, poses even more serious problems for the SVO hypothesis. First of all, Breton has syntactic structures that are quite parallel to Welsh. For example, corresponding to (8), we have Breton (10):

(10) a. Emañ [$_{np}$an den] [$_{vp}$o welout$^{\tilde{}}$ ar c'hi].
is the man seeing the dog

b. [$_{vp}$O welout ar c'hi] emañ [$_{np}$an den].

Unfortunately, the progressive construction in (10) is about the only example of the AuxVSO Celtic periphrastic that exists in Breton. The verbal system has been highly restructured under

French influence. (10) seems to have survived only because French does not mark the progressive morphologically.

Roughly speaking, Breton has the same number and types of auxiliary verbs and verbal inflections as French, including the tradeoff between 'literary' simple past forms and 'colloquial' compound tense forms. The problem that this poses for Sproat's analysis is that Breton allows tensed auxiliaries to occur adjacent to tenseless main verbs. In fact, Sproat predicts that only one verbal element should occur to the left of the subject in VSO languages, but Breton allows sequences of verbal elements to occur to the left of the subject.

Since the structure of the Breton verb is somewhat complex, let us begin with an illustration of simple VSO order. The following sentences contain simple inflected main verbs with no auxiliary verbs present:

(11) a. Ne skriv ket Yann al lizher.
neg writes not Yann the letter
"Yann does not write the letter."

b. Ne gredoc'h ket an istor.
neg believe-2nd-fut not the story
"You will not believe the story."

The main verbs are surrounded by the negative marker ne...ket, which parallels French ne...pas in behavior. Negative sentences have been chosen to illustrate VSO order, because inflected verbs are not allowed in absolute clause-initial position:

(12) a. *Skriv Yann al lizher.
writes Yann the letter
b. *Gredoc'h an istor.
you-will-believe the story

Surface VSO order is possible with virtually any element preceding the verb:

(13) a. Hiziv e skriv Yann al lizher.
today prt writes Yann the letter
"Today Yann writes the letter."
b. Warc'hoaz e gredoc'h an istor.
tomorrow prt you-will-believe the story

The structure of the Breton verb is such that it always begins with a so-called 'verbal particle' (prt), which is follwed by a tensed verb form. In literary Breton, the particle is generally a when preceded by an NP and e when preceded by an oblique element such as a PP or adverb. The particle is sometimes suppressed--e.g. after the negative element ne or before the locative verb form emañ. The tensed verb form can be either an auxiliary bezañ 'be', auxiliary endevout 'have', or main verb. At most, there can be a string of two auxiliaries preceding the main verb, as in French. Here are some examples of AuxVSO sentences:

(14) a. N'en-deus ket skrivet Yann al lizher.
neg-has not written Yann the letter
"Yann did/has not written the letter."
b. N'eo ket bet skrivet al lizher gant Yann.
neg-is not been written the letter by Yann
"The letter has not been [was not] written by Yann."

Now let us see what happens when the tense verbal element would begin the sentence. The result is an ungrammatical sequence:

(15) a. *En-deus skrivet Yann al lizher.
has written Yann the letter

b. *eo bet skrivet al lizher gant Yann.
is been written the letter by Yann

Breton seems to have an aversion to beginning a sentence with a tensed verb. Instead of (15), one finds:

(16) a. Skrivet en-deus Yann al lizher.
written has Yann the letter
"Yann wrote/has written the letter."

b. Skrivet eo bet al lizher gant Yann.
written is been the letter by Yann
"The letter has been/was written by Yann."

Moreover, the word order in (16) is blocked whenever the sentence begins with an element other than the tensed verb (cf. (14)):

(17) a. *Skrivet n'en-deus ket Yann al lizher.
written neg-has not Yann the letter

b. *Skrivet n'eo ket bet al lizher gant Yann.
written neg-is not been the letter by Yann

Thus, Breton sentences can have surface AuxVSO and VAuxSO orders, neither of which are compatible with Sproat's claims about VSO surface order.

Wojcik (1976a) contains a more detailed analysis of Breton word order. Here is a summary of the claims made about the

relationship between AuxVSO and VAuxSO work order:

(18) a. The basic underlying order in Breton is AuxVSO.

b. VAuxSO order is derived by a local transformation that applies when a tensed auxiliary would otherwise begin the main clause.

c. When a tensed main verb would otherwise begin the main clause, DO SUPPORT applies. The main verb is fronted, creating surface V<u>do</u>SO order.

Although I have used the term VERB FRONTING in earlier works to describe the Breton rule that fronts main verbs, I use PRED SHIFT here to avoid confusion with Sproat's term.

The simplest, most straightforward, transformational analysis for Breton is to have a PRED SHIFT rule that shifts main verbs to the left of the auxiliary. One very interesting consequence of the PRED SHIFT analysis is that it explains the distribution of Breton auxiliary <u>do</u>.[8] Breton DO SUPPORT is triggered by PRED SHIFT:

(19) a. Skriv a ra Yann al lizher.
write prt does Yann the letter
"Yann writes the letter."

b. Krediñ a raioc'h an istor.
believe prt do-2nd-fut the story
"You will believe the story."

Auxiliary <u>do</u> simply does not occur in negative sentences or other environments where PRED SHIFT is blocked (cf. 11).

Since my 1976 PRED SHIFT analysis of Breton word order, there has been very little comment on it in the literature. It is worth noting that the controversy over whether Breton should be considered an SVO language has largely ignored Breton verbal structure. Amy Varin (1979), for example, has argued that modern spoken Breton, particularly the Tregorrois dialect, is statistically weighted toward SVO word order. Lenora Timm (1986), however, has presented excellent counterevidence to this claim. Timm found no statistical propensity for surface SVO order in either 19th or 20th century writers or in her study of the spoken Carhaisien dialect. Even if there were such a propensity, however, it would not establish the typological argument. As Timm points out (footnote 2), there never has been any consensus on what establishes a typological classification. The question is not over the mere existence of a word order frequency, but over what causes that frequency.

A more recent argument for SVO order in Breton comes from Hendrick (1986), who looks at negative quantifier asymmetries in Breton subjects. His point is that quantifiers such as <u>den ebet</u> 'no one' must precede the verb in surface order if they serve as subject. That is, one can say <u>den ebet ne VERB...</u>, but not *<u>ne VERB den ebet...</u> Hendrick argues that GB theory has a natural explanation for this in that the Empty Category Principle can be seen to constrain a rule of quantifier movement. Whatever the merits of Hendrick's argument are, there are a couple of problems

with it. One problem is that he relied on rather young informants (in their 30's), who cannot be considered Breton-dominant speakers. French dominance might actually affect intuitions about word order in Breton. The other problem is that GB theory must deal with the overall structure of Breton clauses, not just those containing quantifiers. If GB theory cannot find a natural explanation for Breton verbs, then Hendrick's argument is moot. It is difficult to see how the theory can survive without the presumption of underlying VP constituents.

4. The Problem of Copular Clauses

Breton auxiliary verbs are something of a problem for Sproat's SVO Hypothesis because they remove the force of the claim that VERB FRONTING is motivated by the need to support INFL morphologically. If Breton conforms to the hypothesis, then one has to explain why the language moves main verbs to the left of subjects even when an inflected auxiliary is present. It is also necessary to account for the fact that Breton blocks VERB FRONTING when the progressive periphrastic is present. But these are not the worst problems to be encountered by the hypothesis. There is also the problem that copular sentences run completely counter to the hypothesis, if not the entire x-bar framework.

The problem is that VSO languages, unlike SVO and SOV languages, separate main verbs from direct objects. It has been an unquestioned assumption of most generative syntacticians that

copular sentences are structured more like transitive sentences than intransitive ones. This is an easy assumption to maintain as long as a language places predicate NPs and APs next to the copular linking verb. The copula is the only element in a sentence that belongs to the verb lexical category, so it seems to fill the 'main verb' slot. The constiuent that follows it fills the 'direct object' slot. If the copula behaves more like an auxiliary than a main verb--as it does in virtually all languages--then one need only posit transformations that move it into the AUX constituent. What shakes the foundations of conventional syntactic theories is the fact that VSO languages prefer to position the predicate AP/NP to the left of the subject. Direct objects vastly prefer a position to the right of the subject.

The idea that VSO languages confer a special structure on copular sentences seems not to have occurred to many syntax typologists. Let me therefore propose the following universal:

(20) Languages invariably place the predicate AP/NP in the same syntactic position as the main verb, and the copula in the same syntactic position as auxiliary verbs.

Another way of putting it is to say that the logical category <u>predicate</u> is also a syntactic category at the clause level. I am not aware of any exceptions to (20), and it turns out that most counterexamples to it are easy to dismiss.

At first blush, Welsh seems to contradict (20), because the position of predicate AP/NPs is to the right of the subject.

Consider the following sentences:

(21) a. Y mae'r bachgen yn hapus.*
prt is-the boy prt happy
"The boy is happy."

b. Mae hwn yn lyfr.
is this prt (a) book
"This is a book."

c. Mae hwn yn ddisgrifiad gyrrwr o'r ddamwain.
is this prt description driver of-the accident
"This is a description of a driver of the accident."

Unfortunately, one could interpret the sentences of (21) to be structurally isomorphic to periphrastic sentences, where the copula plays the role of an auxiliary and the predicate phrase of a main verb. So Welsh does not really stand as a counterexample to (20).

Breton is quite a different story. There can be little doubt that Breton predicate AP/NPs are generated in the main verb slot of the sentence. This is so, because predicate AP/NPs undergo PRED SHIFT, the same movement rule that shifts main verbs to the left of

auxiliaries. The sentences in (22) illustrate this:

(22) a. Brav eo an amzer.
nice is the weather
"The weather is nice."

b. Ki ar mestr eo hennez.
dog the master is he
"He is the master's dog."

c. Ar re-mañ eo
the things-these is
It's these.

I would derive (22) from underlying Be-Pred-Subj order:

(23) PRED eo ∅ SUBJECT

The evidence that PRED SHIFT treats main verbs and predicate AP/NPs alike is quite solid.[10] Everything that blocks PRED SHIFT with main verbs also blocks it with predicate AP/NPs. For example, the negative marker ne...ket blocks it:

(24) a. N'eo ket brav an amzer.
neg-is not nice the weather

b. N'eo ket ki ar mestr hennez.

c. N'eo ket ar re-man.

(25) a. *Brav n'eo ket an amzer.

b. *Ki ar mestr n'eo ket hennez. (where 25b=24b)

c. *Ar re-man n'eo ket.

As with inflected main verbs, PRED SHIFT is blocked when some other constituent is topicalized, e.g. the subject. The following sentences have topicalized subjects:

(26) a. An amzer a zo brav.

b. Hennez a zo ki ar mestr.

Note that Breton eo is normally suppleted by a zo when the subject precedes it.

The problem, then, is not that all VSO languages have surface PRED-SUBJECT order, but that there are any languages at all with this order. My guess is that most,if not all, VSO languages with surface SUBJECT-PRED order (e.g. Welsh and Irish) also have a lot of periphrastic constructions with surface SUBJECT-MainVERB orders. How does GB theory deal with those VSO languages that generate NPs and APs to the left of the subject?

5. Conclusion

The final paragraph (p. 215) in Sproat's article is very instructive and worth repeating here:

> This little sketch will, I hope, have shown that the SVO analysis, far from being a procrustean assumption required to make the theory work is really the only analysis allowed by the theory; indeed, it is hard to see how a grammar including a rule such as S->V NP NP could be deduced under the set of assumptions currently held within Government and Binding theory. And this is surely a desideratum: we want our theory to limit the possible analyses of data as much as possible. If it does not, we

> cannot be sure that we are saying anything substantial at all about the facts. And if it does and if...the theory-induced analysis produces interesting and correct predictions about the data to be found, then this is a strong confirmation of both the analysis and the theory which drove us to it.

Given the Breton data, however, the SVO analysis must once again be considered a procrustean assumption. At present, the strongest reason to maintain it is to be able to rationalize the GB framework.

It is difficult to end this discussion without drawing some attention to the perverse symmetry that exists between the modern SVO hypothesis and McCawley's older 'VSO hypothesis' (cf. McCawley 1970). McCawley's theory of generative semantics was associated with so-called 'abstract syntax', which had no trouble with the concept that VP constituents were a side effect of syntactic derivations. Generative semanticists promoted the view that constituent structure was a natural derivative of logical representation, which seems to have no clear motivation for a VP constituent. VP nodes were taken to be sentences that had somehow lost their subjects.

Although the SVO hypothesis is every bit as abstract as McCawley's hypothesis, it comes to us from so-called 'concrete syntax'. Now we have a theory that sees VP-less sentences as highly unnatural. VSO sentence structure is taken to have a VP

constituent that has somehow lost its verb. Clause structure itself is taken to be completely derived from lexical categories. Modern GB theory is remarkably rich in detailed observations about the behavior of syntactic constituents. But it is going to have a very difficult time in arriving at an insightful analysis of VSO syntax.

Notes

[1] I wish to thank the following individuals for helpful comments and discussions concerning the topic of this paper: James McCawley, John Hennessey, Geoff Nathan, Margaret Winters, Ed Battistella, Geoffrey Pullum.

[2] It is not clear to me that Welsh has an optional auxiliary do. It all depends on whether nonstatives can cooccur with it, as they do with English auxiliary do. If not, then (5) is probably some kind of cleft construction that corresponds roughly to English What John did was see a dragon. (cf. Ross 1972)

[3] Both this work and Sproat's were strongly influenced by Awberry. Most Welsh examples cited are from her work.

[4] Actually, Sproat follows Awberry in calling Topicalization clefting. I am not convinced that this is proper for Welsh, but I know that it is improper for Breton. Breton has separate constructions for topicalization and clefting.

[5] Breton, like other Celtic languages, is noted for morpho-syntactic substitutions at the beginnings of words. For example, gwelout 'see' becomes welout after the progressive particle o. The conditions that trigger mutations can be quite interesting. However, unless they have a direct bearing on the discussion, nothing further will be said about them in this article.

[6] The compound auxiliary have/be can signal past tense or completed action in French and Breton.

[7] The compound past tense in French uses avoir été 'have been' for passive. Breton uses bezañ bet 'be been'. This is one of the minor ways in which the Breton auxiliary system differs from that of French.

[8] Auxiliary do only occurs in one other place in Breton: in tag formations. Breton do is quite parallel to English do in that it serves as a dummy tense-bearing element. However, it never appears in most of the environments that trigger English DO SUPPORT--negation, question formation, emphasis, etc.

[9] The morpheme yn is neither the preposition 'in' nor the continuous marker. It causes a lenited mutation of the following consonant, unlike the other two morphemes. Therefore, it is a separate morpheme and serves purely as a marker of the predicate AP/NP constituent.

[10] See Wojcik (1976b) for a more detailed discussion of copular sentences in Breton.

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